

Memo to Senior Partners: Motivating Younger Professionals to Generate New Business

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“You will motivate more people by capturing their imagination with an idea than with money.” – Cornelius Bodine, Jr., 1916-1987 – my father.

As you have noticed, there is a generation gap in your law firm. You and your fellow partners would like to plan your exit strategy, but meanwhile the younger generation is not ready to step up to become the new leadership.

The associates may resent being asked to generate new businesses. They say they want “work-life balance” when you suspect they just want to go home early. Some of the associates don’t even care if they become a partner! Some will leave just after they finish paying off their student loans – perhaps to enter another field entirely.

How do you motivate these “drone” lawyers who view their position at your firm as *just a job*?

The Solution

You have to make your practice cool again.

In the field of law, you need to bring back the élan of Perry Mason getting a confession on the witness stand, or Paul Newman winning in “The Verdict,” or how a personal injury lawyer represented families whose children died of leukemia in “A Civil Action.” What they’ve seen so far are slimy lawyers played by George Clooney in “Michael Clayton,” and “Boston Legal” with the bloated William Shatner playing the unethical Denny Crane, and brilliant yet ruthless lawyer Patty Hewes in “Damages.”

The younger lawyers already understand that running a law firm is a business. They’ll take a pay cut to work at a different place that they think is a happening office that’s fun to work in. What they need to understand that being a lawyer is a great profession, that in the past the halls of Congress and our national leaders were once primarily lawyers, and that being a lawyer comes with a lot respect and authority.

Show Some Leadership

Close the firm at 4:30 one day and take everyone out for a happy hour. Relax the dress code and let people work in business casual clothes. Be somebody they *want* to work with. Share your strategy of a case and tell the young lawyers the importance of where they fit in, so they feel a sense of teamwork. People will stay at a firm if they like the people they work for, especially if they admire and look up to you.

Be a mentor

Take a serious look at the next generation and pick out the lawyer you'd like to groom to turn into a rainmaker. You and your protégé are going to market together. Your young lawyers won't succeed in business development unless they have a silver-haired lawyer with business experience show them how it's done. Enter into an express understanding with the protégé that you will show them how to get clients if they do the same in return. For example:

- Before you meet with a prospective client, ask your protégé to research the company and come up with five good questions you can both ask during the meeting.
- Take the young lawyer on meetings with prospective clients and have your protégé handle the follow-up contacts.
- At the meeting with the potential client, let the younger lawyer hear what you say and see what you do to attract the client. Give your protégé a speaking role at the meeting.
- You are probably overcommitted with organizations and associations you belong to. Select one that you will transfer to the younger lawyer. Attend one of the trade associations meetings together with your protégé, make some initial introductions, and then give your protégé the responsibility to get new clients from the organization. This will free you up to concentrate on the groups that generate clients for you.
- Introduce the younger lawyer to the key contacts at your clients. Arrange a "how's business?" meeting with the client, and ask the client to bring along people some of their young people. Assign your protégé to get to know people his or her own age at the client. Afterward, de-brief the young lawyer and tell you what's going on at the client company.
- When the younger lawyers brings in a new file, find a way to make him or her be the handling lawyer. Having responsibility makes a young lawyer feel important.
- Find a way to give your protégé the origination credit for generating new business. At the very least, split the credit that you would get as a partner.

- Tell your protégé that you want to present a web seminar, record a podcast or start a blog together. You will supervise the content of the marketing vehicle. But you want the younger lawyer to figure out the technology, and have a speaking/writing role as well.

Create a personal relationship. Ask the younger lawyer why they decided to go to law school, and what they like best about law practice. Open up, and give your protégé the same information about yourself. Tell war stories about the great lawyers you have known, including specific details about the difference they made in your firm or community. Invite your protégé and his spouse to your home for dinner. Young people want to be inspired and are looking for role models. Recommend that they take a vacation to Washington, D.C. and see the original copy of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Make them realize *why* law is one of the great professions. Certainly, running a law firm is a business. But give them an emotional reason to be a rainmaker at your law firm.